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The Future of Communication: from New Media to Postmedia

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Abstract

How is the world going to change in the near future, say, the next five years? This question has several answers, each bearing a different nuance depending on the area of interest. As far as communication and communications are concerned, a few elements are extremely probable. In my opinion, in the following period we are going to witness at least seven major changes concerning human interaction: 1) Integrated electronic equipment will be employed; 2) Generalization of interconnection; 3) Diversification of available services and applications; 4) Widening and generalization of the field of cloud computing; 5) Generalized communication, through exchange of information and generation of content; 6) Communication will become a large field, as people will move on from exchange of information to exchange of services and products; 7) Rewriting the principles of ethics. All components are taken in view, from the interpersonal to the global one, including mass-media and social media.

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1. The future and its image

I believe that, in the near future, the following changes will be taking place in communication:

1) Integrated electronic equipment will be employed: the wide screen mobile phone and the tablet. Under these circumstances, landline telephony will see its role diminished, almost coming to a halt. There will be increasingly less usage for personal computers and laptops, even though the latter were still fashionable in 2013 everywhere in the world. The mobile phone and the tablet stand apart due to their reliability, high operability, increased data storage capacity, various and complex functions, as well as the ability to run a high number of applications.

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2) Generalization of interconnection. The spread of wireless connections and access to services provided by satellites will become generalized, with costs dropping at the same time. The following years will bring telephones and tablets with automatic Internet connection as a basic integrated service. It is going to be nearly impossible to renounce this function, which will keep us constantly online. Communication will thus be possible in almost any place and under any circumstances.

3) Diversification of available services and applications. The tablet and the mobile telephone will be used both for communication proper, as well as for content creation. In this case, they will be used to edit, store, process information, create communication products, modify and archive them. The new applications will prove useful in surveillance and control processes, activity monitoring, elements that are essential in intelligence. The area is wide; because there are already programs being developed that will boost the level of media and technological integration. Health and education are top fields. Thus, the cell telephone and the tablet will be taking x rays, also supplying the first clues on possible illnesses.

4) Widening and generalization of the field of cloud computing. Most people, some with poor training in using computers and other electronic tools, will benefit from services and applications without needing to know how they are built. These services and applications (from website hosting and the need for broad band, to using mobile telephones for medical diagnosis) will be usable (some have already been accessible for a while now) free of charge or for a fee (by buying or renting). Under these circumstances the online newsroom concept takes shape, there no longer being a need for physical work space. The notion can be generalized, tracing information from source to receiver, by typing, selecting and editing, in other fields, as well, such as education, public relations and information services (intelligence).

5) Generalized communication, through exchange of information and generation of content. Technology becomes easy to handle, so that all people, even those of average education, are able to realize high level communicational products. It is an on-the-go professionalization, practicing for fun or as a means of production, to earn one's living. Differences will be erased between professionals and amateurs. Up to a certain level, i.e. college level, all users will be to a great extent familiarized with these tools turned into a necessity.

6) Communication will become a large field, as people will move on from exchange of information to exchange of services and products. Electronic trade will become dominant, and financial systems will emphasize their dependence on informatics systems. Physical money (coins, bank notes and securities) will be in less and less numbers, as payments and banks transfers will become dominant. The educational system will benefit even more from the new services, which in the meantime will have become interactive and more stimulating. Entertainment will also change as there will be a great pressure for such products, and visual culture will itself become interactive.

7) Rewriting the principles of ethics. The erasure of the differences between professionals and non-professional will also involve a change in deontological codes. Obviously, the Internet has to stay a free space for the expression of thoughts, ideas and for promoting people, products, services and values. As we cannot formulate specific limitations, as is the case with professional ethics, access and manifestation in the virtual space will involve a return to the fundamental principles of ethics. There is a great deal of concern regarding some aspects considered negative in the virtual space. Protection can be achieved, however not by establishing control, but by resorting to existing legal instruments and by promoting moral values which would be accepted by as many as possible. The rewriting of ethical codes has already begun.

In this context we are talking about the *postmedia* phenomenon. It defines the change from the classic mass media to the new (digital) media, assimilating the facilities of fast communication and of tightening bonds, but also the tensions emerged as a consequence of generated dangers, or simply from the pressures exerted by fast changes. We are going through a time of accumulations, but on a postmodern background, of superficiality, fickleness and permanent undermining of values, but also of contradictions generated by the helplessness or lack of will to act, as well as violent actions of protest in favour of or against democracy. We are living in a media culture which is no longer understood as one belonging to the elites, to indisputable preeminences, but one of mass (popular culture, according to a coined term in the English language), a culture which seems to offer unimaginable possibilities to exploit creativity and imagination, often undermining itself in lazy or strange, incomprehensible experiments. Postmedia offer the framework for all these hesitations and certainties.

2. Media: new or online?

Everything is media and anything can be propagated through the media. We are living in a society where communication has become decisive, in that it is not only a linking tool, but an element which structures society. Everything is placed under the sign of... totality, these being aspects identified by Altheide & Snow (1991). Integration is explicit: "Today all institutions are media institutions. As more experiences are influenced by media logic and discourse, our media is totally media". What is surprising is that the statements of the two authors were made a few years before the communication explosion in the Internet Era. The network would come and simplify these forms of interaction and media structuring of the society. The suggestions formulated by the two would be subsequently developed by other researchers. Among them, Peter Dahlgren (1996) would add the technical dimension of media integration, beside the organizational one. An approach in the context of new media explosion would be made by Deuze & Dimoudi (2002). Mark Deuze would approach the characteristics of *media logic* by referring to the specialized field of journalistic communication. He would estimate that integration, by what he called "convergence continuum", would become a reality and a way of work: "sooner or later all media organizations move towards a stage where integration of different parts of the news-making process (including audio, video, text, images, graphics; but also marketing, cross-promotion, sales, redistribution and inter-activity with publics) is achieved" Deuze (2007). It would even be signaled that evolution towards integration is not linear, as some parts of the media organizations are slower. This is an idea which can be extended to the whole society. Some organizations adapt more easily, by adopting the new technologies, while others show a conservative spirit. Even states have different integration rhythms. It is not necessarily an issue of choice. There are social, economic and administrative stakeholders who wish to become part of the convergence trend, but lack the necessary resources for acquiring services and materials. It is a delicate situation, also manifested on an individual level, because the new tools and technologies cost money.

Ian Hargreaves would use the expression *ambient news* to highlight the fact that, presently, we cohabit with media products and are surrounded by them: "Today surrounds us like the air we breathe. Much of it is literally ambient: displayed on computers, public billboards, trains, aircraft and mobile phones" (2003: 3)". We place ourselves in this network through the connections made, and contemporary existence and quality of living depend to a great extent upon the utilities at hand (Szabo 2011, 40-41). Media content can be accessed with relative ease, sometimes overwhelming us with the multitude of offers aimed at us, however it is difficult to establish, under optimum circumstances, how many are useful and how many are harmful. This is an issue also underlined by Bob Franklin: "But, paradoxically, because so much news is available, people are not always able to discriminate between the good and the bad" (Franklin 2005, 16).

"What's new about the new media?" was a question posed by Sonia Livingstone in 1999. The answer given at the time placed technology at the centre of attention. Television, with its several channels available, terrestrial, via satellite and cable, was at that time the pole of attraction. A second new sector had at its core the computer, with games, Internet access, but especially through its opening to online trade (Livingstone 1999). The two fields of development were possible by way of interaction. Thus, technological convergence was taking place, which in turn favoured media convergence. A fundamental change was being reached in people's homes, through social convergence, undermining traditional ways of communication, so that the question now needs to be reformulated: What's new about the new media and in the social area? After more than a decade, the landscape was almost unrecognizable. First mobile phones, then laptops, wireless technology and tablets modified yet again the way we communicate. The TV set in the living room or bedroom, the computer in the study or at work lost ground to the newcomers. It was a new face of convergence, bringing changes to the public and private sectors, especially by the integration offered by social media. But what is presently the place of mass media in this framework?

3. Challenges for journalists

Journalists use social media for two precise purposes: 1) promoting their own journalistic productions; 2) gathering information, according to a recent study. However, if we look at the percentages we see reason for

worrying: 84% of journalists use the opportunities offered by social media as sources of information and only 81% of it for publication. The data are presented in *Social Journalism Study 2012*, a report drawn up by Cision & Canterbury Christ Church University (UK), which has the purpose of highlighting the impact of new technologies on the work of journalists. It is a serious research, with respondents from Great Britain, but also from other states with an advanced media market. 84% documentaries in social media leave very little space for the other professional communication techniques. Another relevant change of rapport shows a decreasing trend of the trust professionals have in the quality of social media products. While in 2011 33% appreciated the quality of these products, in 2012 the level was of merely 24%. Explicably, young journalists are the most active in this sector, qualifying themselves as cyberspace information “hunters”, as termed by the quoted study.

At this stage one needs to make an analysis of what is happening before the news reaches the printed page, or the television or computer screen. Research of various types, applying the methods and tools of several sciences (social and engineering) have brought forward relevant answers about how the world has changed under the influence of mass media and what the consequences are in small communities or in the global village. However, media communication changes even the way we perceive the exchange of information. Modifications take place because there are important evolutions regarding the way of doing and understanding journalism. Bardoel & Deuze (2001) would advance the expression *new information* in relation to the Internet and the offensive of other new technologies. The new information has a polyvalent meaning here, because it expresses: 1) the fundamental character of knowledge offered for the first time to the various categories of the public; 2) the development and use of updated methods and techniques for the editing and dissemination of information, and for its propagation throughout the media; 3) the multiplying of communication channels and the reconsidering of some already existing ones, an operation carried out in the context of technological evolution.

Journalists generate the change, and the new communicational reality is also reflected upon them, causing other evolutions. Challenges seem greater than at other times, as the multimedia implications are more obvious. Following a few coordinates of the new status of journalists in the era of digital media we notice two important traits of those who edit and process news: (1) the professionals of this genre are compelled to undergo a overspecialization, becoming what is designated with an already existing term videojournalists or even universal, integrated journalists; (2) the borders between professionals and outsiders of the citizen journalist type tend to diminish, due to a specialization of the latter. At the same time, we notice the emergence of the virtual editorial concept (online newsroom), as the old gathering place for reporters and editors becomes a mere memory.

4. Social media and surveillance

There is also pressure coming from social networks, with their wide offer of blogs and portals, having a great permeability between journalistic genres and a much higher subjectivism of approach and content. The future will bring along yet another important change, already visible, by the fact that the equipment used will be increasingly integrated, so that soon journalists will use the same equipment for everything they have to do. And there's a lot they have to do. The new multimedia tools are, however, available to the wide public, and various people are presently involved in news production either for traditional media institutions or for the ones freshly emerged in the electronic environment.

The new technologies also allow the intensification of the surveillance process. Development is seen in two directions, which can become contradictory: (1) surveillance of the environment for the identification of challenges and of those who make attempts to disrupt society and quiet, safe life; (2) use of data to induce control of society, to determine a certain obedient social behaviour. In this context, the future of mass media outlines itself in a thought-provoking and challenging way. The opening offered by *digital media*, translated into the transmission speed of signals and the establishing of links between people, in large or smaller communities, but animated by specific interests, requires an essential note to be made: the Internet is in itself neither bad nor good, just as new media is (or should be) morally inert and impartial. In reality, the advantages of instantaneous communication and of the possibility to establish contact, even over great distances, also benefit those who wish to undermine judicial and social values, to exploit the new communicational convergence in order to fulfill reprehensible purposes.

We are mentioning here two of them: 1) cyberbullying, which translates as the exposure of children to subtle or direct psychological attacks, often with sexual implications; 2) ideology-based violence, which can imply terrorist, anarchistic attacks, meant to undermine democracy and the values of open societies. A recent study, carried out by 13 American researchers, which is going to become one of reference regarding communication in ideology-centered groups (often violent ideology), shows the way new communication possibilities facilitate their activity and increase their cohesion: “The internet provides an outlet for these groups to spread messages that are not typically socially acceptable or would not be welcomed on mainstream media outlets. Consequently, the internet has quickly become the preferred method of communication for these groups” (Byrne *et. al.* 2013).

These activities come, most of them, to the attention of information services. The field of intelligence has itself undergone significant mutations in the digital era. The challenges are numerous and real, especially after the bloody attack of September 11th 2001 on the United States. Surveillance of cyberspace activity has extended, has become more complex and has gained in depth. The Internet and multimedia allow intensification and broadening of contacts within groups of criminal intent, but they also offer government agents more refined methods of surveillance, which helps several threats, but not all, to be identified in time.

5. The terminological and technological offence

The investigated field, with focus on journalism, uses concepts typical of this area of practical evolution, but also of research: new media, digital media, cybermedia, mobile media, multimedia, technomedia, inter(net)media, global media, social media. Some have overlapping meanings, others designate various fields, but with some junction points. Some designate rather the technical toolbox; others also include structuring elements of some areas of human activity. It is, however, an evolution which cannot be separated from the present’s media culture, from the moldings in the fields of scientific research and education. I am reiterating here a (short) work definition for new media, following which I’ll lay down in context the analyses which give a wholesome meaning, closer to reality. New media “includes online communities, social networking (e.g. LinkedIn, friendster, Facebook), social bookmarking, blogging (including vlogging and microblogging), video and photo sharing, mashups, wikis, podcasts, tagging, RSSfeeds, *apps*, interactive maps and other online based tools” (Wolf & Archer 2012). In a paper on the fundamental concepts in the field of journalistic communication, Hamer would paradoxically give a short definition, which would however prove adequate: “This is a broad communication concept which can refer to any of the following related terms: emerging digital technologies and platforms; online journalism; and electronic and multimedia publishing (particularly on the Internet and world wide web) (2005b, 160-161).

Mark Deuze (2004) would make a distinction between *online journalism* and *multimedia journalism*. For the first term he would add synonymous formulae: cyberjournalism, e-journalism and internet journalism. For multimedia he seems to reserve the field of technological convergence, where one acts with unique equipment, but having multiple functions, capable of ensuring communication on several panels. The reference is to existing or possible links, to channels, and not to media contents. Also, it can be understood as an integrated form of presenting various contents. These can function independently or can be assembled into more ample constructions, such as websites or even portals (large media and communication platforms). Online journalism makes one think of a real time link between user and author. Contents are accessed as soon as they are posted, which means there is a relationship, one facilitate by multimedia. Understanding things this way, we see that multimedia can function as a part, as composing element, of online journalism. By analyzing the various meanings given to multimedia, sometimes contradictory ones, as well as the contexts where it appears, Martin Hamer seems to favour rather the manifestation of multimedia as *hypermedia*, but also as a possibility to disseminate contents over networks: “Multimedia online news can also offer specific features such as webcasting, can provide maps and diagrams, and polls, in addition to nurturing partnerships and resulting in mergers between different media companies” (2005a, 156).

6. The complex context of communication

Evolution is explosive, in the sense that the present is marked by a large sphere of challenges. Communication becomes complex, being propagated throughout media to an ever larger extent. Paradoxically, it is not a gain for journalism as a type of specialized communication, because in the era of digital media anyone can be communicator, and professionalism becomes an option, not a necessity. Anything is transmitted, although it is hard to believe that there is a public, as small as it may be for each content placed into the electronic environment. However, perspective is important. There are virtual data in a dormant state, unsearched by anyone. Sometimes, quite rarely, they may come to the attention of a larger public, being propelled by mechanisms that are not very easy to understand. It is a paradox: there is a whole lot of data made public, but also a lot of data which find no public, no users. Under these circumstances, it is clear that it does not suffice to publish on a website, but one needs to ensure the elements which would make this content interesting for the others. Increasingly, the Internet becomes a storage place (ever larger, of course), which is however mostly filled with useless things.

A constant influence in this field comes from the new philosophical and thought investigation theories. While most of us live in a communicational “bath”, subjected to influences and influencing in turn, at the junction of radio and electromagnetic waves, it is equally true that the world is influenced by the results of various epistemological surveys, but also by ideologies or influencing strategies. In this context, I believe that the manifestations of communication in correlation with new technologies call for an approach which would also take into account the impact of theoretical thinking, in an ensemble identified with the term postmedia. As can be seen from the enumeration of specific terms above, these took shape either in opposition or in agreement with other dominating concepts in present day public debates. The mechanisms of change are not always obvious and there probably is a complex of factors and influences which mark evolution. Bruun (2011) formulated this issue as a question: “Is it systemic forces, for instance, technology, economy and competition, or is it the change producing forces of human agency, for instance, creativity, artistic vision and imagination?” The answer has to be an integrating one, to contextualize all the factors mentioned, but also others.

At the same time, we need a unifying term, capable of guiding us in the maze of these challenges and quick changes. We use the name postmedia, which is defined in three areas of understanding: (1) New (digital) after old media, the one before the Internet and mobile telephones; (2) New media (the one in the present) depending on the generated effects and in confluence with the elements of the public and social spheres; (3) New media in contemporaneity and the implications of the changes it brings about, which can be defined as a new communicational ethics. All these aspects contextualize in the field of human existence and of challenges for the future. Postmedia can offer elements for a correct anticipation of what will follow from the point of view of what is typical of media, of integrating with social media, but also with political media, that liquid and pulsating field where decisions are taken. Both information, as well as decisions in postmedia, can facilitate increasingly easy access to direct sources of information, but can also imply an increase in control, by surveillance and imposing rules of compliance. Not for a second must we omit the great discrepancy emerged, the challenge between efforts for generalized access to information, even strategic ones, and the trend to turn them into merchandise and trade them.

The exploring of these two media contexts mentioned above (what happens in journalistic activity before publication and how technology is influencing this activity) is defined in relation to a particularly important element in communicational space: the *deadline*. It remains a traditional pressure factor for professionals in printed press editorial offices or for electronic publications with a set date of posting. There is a moment when any given newspaper has to be printed, in order to arrive in time and meet the readers (Szabo 1999, 12). In the case of electronic publications, the deadline is the moment until which all editorial operations have been concluded, and the articles can be posted on sites or can be reproduced on various platforms in order to be distributed through these.

7. The speed of information

One of the basic rules of media communication is the quick dissemination of new information obtained. A quick review of the way this happens, from a historical point of view, gives us the context for adequate understanding. When it was about events having a major impact on community life, newspapers printed special editions. Thus, one did not wait around with the fresh news until the usual edition would be printed. Radios, and later televisions, stood apart due to this very ability to quickly transmit new information. When news is out of the ordinary, the current programme is interrupted to give way to news. The heavy digitalization of communication imposes a new kind of pressure on presenting news quickly. The strict framework of media communication is overstepped, as media workers are compelled to specialize in connected fields in order to deal with the informational flow and new professional challenges. It is the postmedia dimension, because several traditional aspects of the way journalism is practiced disappear. There are periods of transition between the various stages of evolution, but they are much faster than in the past, which allows us to speak of a balanced radicalism.

The participants of the PR News Media Relations Next Practices Summit of December 2012 concurred among other ideas regarding the evolution for 2013, that the *deadline* exigency has lost some of its importance, so instead the *always-on* exigency was formulated (Pressfeed 2012). Always live implies a permanent link between the reporter and the media institution, in order to transmit or post information. Ottosen & Krumsvik (2012) retain some of the old formula, but suggest a new expression: *continuous deadlines*. However, changes are profound depthwise, because the presenting of truly interesting news really means new ways of writing, and upgrading classic techniques. Working on the field and the relationship with sources (face-to-face, by e-mail or telephone) also becomes structured as a continuous state. We are not only online with the public, but also with the suppliers of information. Thus, reporters are redefined as universal journalists. They discover the news bearing potential, establish and maintain the relationship with the sources, edit texts, gather and process images, then send everything to the editorial office (which can also be online) or post it themselves directly onto the press institution's site. The managers' trend in media organizations is to select personnel capable of doing all these operations (Deuze 2004). In editorial offices there has occurred an overlapping of tasks. The differences between reporters, editors and other staff has blurred, all of them also undertaking technical tasks, which were before not typical of them. There is a trend in this respect, of the journalist-of-all-trades: "In newsrooms the focus is changing from working for a single medium towards a situation in which journalists are required to produce news for several media platforms simultaneously" (Hermans & Vergeer 2009). It is a good thing up to a certain point. Too great a diversification and the carrying out of operations in different fields can overload the personnel, leading to a decrease in performance and poor results. Then again, it is obvious that certain jobs need to be done by specialists, because a good journalist cannot be equally efficient as an operator, image editor and newsroom director.

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